

Reconsidering the Meanings of “-Scape” in Soundscape

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Keywords: Soundscape; Francisco López; Murray R. Schafer; Garth Paine

Abstract: This paper serves as an attempt to delve into and to manifest a discourse that invite readers to gaze through ideas and writings by Murray Schafer (*The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* in 1977), Francisco López (two essays written in between 1997 and 1998), as well as a more recent article by Garth Paine (*Acoustic Ecology 2.0* in 2017). Both the similarities and differences found among all the viewpoints and arguments would ultimately form a more comprehensive understanding of musical concepts and ideas that were aroused and investigated: soundscape, acoustic ecology, field recordings, acoustic environment, immersive environment, keynote sounds, sound signal, soundmark, just to name a few terms that will be approached in this paper. In addition, the proposed discussion will eventually enable us to rediscover the sounding world that its signification inseparably connects to other dimensional discussion on absolute vs. program music, the role of listener as composer-performer, live performance vs. recordings, as well as sound environment vs. well-beings of humans.

1. Introduction

The emergence of the idea “*soundscape*” in the world of sonic art, later has led to a profound and raging discussions of its meanings, applications and even the reconceptualization of understanding sound art in general. The limitation of our linguistic system to define any artistic concept is universally acknowledged, yet “language is but one way to prompt the construction”^[1] of art space. A closer look into the terminology in fact stands out as an essential starting-point to summon the implication and the meaning of “*-scape*.” The etymology of “*-scape*” is outlined in the authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary* as “forming nouns denoting a view, picture, or (literal or figurative) landscape of a type specified by the first element.”^[2] Here, the visual implication and tendency is portrayed by the words, “view” and “picture.” Thus, numbers of published writings by significant artists and scholars on denial and reconsideration of the term *soundscape* were in the spotlight, aiming for further reexamination on the concept.

2. Murray R. Schafer’s “Imitation of Nature”

Wrongly perceiving one artist who “invented” a new sonic conception would often unfaillingly cause false statement and information. Canadian composer and writer Murray Schafer never invented the idea of soundscape, yet its notion is hugely popularized by Schafer in the 1960s with his works

and pioneered *World Soundscape Project* in the late 1960s.[3] The definition is more complicated than just “the entire mosaic of sounds heard in a specific area.”[4] Providing and situating Schafer’s understanding of soundscape in the first place may permit us to build a foundation that prepares for López and Paine’s writings that revitalize the concept. To quote Schafer’s own words for the generic space of soundscape:

“The soundscape is any acoustic field of study. We may speak of a musical composition as a soundscape, or a radio program as a soundscape or an acoustic environment as a soundscape. We can isolate an acoustic environment as a field of study just as we can study the characteristics of a given landscape. However, it is less easy to formulate an exact impression of a soundscape than of a landscape. There is nothing in sonography corresponding to the instantaneous impression which photography can create.”[5]

However, the initial clarification that is needed here is that *acoustic environment* is never the same as *soundscape* – while acoustic environment might refer to all acoustic sounds, the core of soundscape centers on the “*immersiveness*” of an environment. That is, the sonic environment in soundscape not only involves the natural space, but also the presence of human perceptual experience. “A soundscape can be seen as both the acoustic manifestation of ‘place,’ and a medium through which a place’s social meaning is reconfirmed.”[4] This leads to the three main features of soundscape identified by Schafer: *keynote sounds*, *sounds signal* and *soundmark* that deserves in-depth discussion on:

“The *keynote sounds*... outline the character of men living among them. The *keynote sounds* of a landscape are those created by its geography and climate: water, wind, forests, plains, birds, insects and animals... they may have imprinted themselves so deeply on the people hearing them that life without them would be sensed as a distinct impoverishment.”[5]

Schafer’s description of *keynote sound*, though seemingly serves for the explanation of the feature and quality, implicitly shed light on the tendency of his understanding of *soundscape* – that is, the presence of *keynote sound* “imprints” more than just sounds, but also the partial element of landscape, could it be scenery or specific object. When the *keynote sound* is absent, the “distinct impoverishment” that could potentially be “sensed” is based on human’s pre-expectation, pre-association, and pre-experience on the *-scape*, as Schafer explained vividly with the analogy of paintings:

“Imitation of landscape in music corresponds historically to the development of landscape painting... imitations of nature were then created to be exhibited in unnatural setting... a descriptive piece of music turns the walls of the concert hall into windows, exposed to the country. By means of this metaphorical fenestration we break out of the confinements of the city to the free *paysage* (landscape) beyond.”[5]

The “*keynote*” words here in the quote are “imitation of nature” and “metaphorical fenestration” that a *soundscape* work could be the “windows” to lead perceivers to the landscape that the music is imitating. The other two features also worth to be presented: *Sound signal*, is defined by Schafer as “foreground sounds and they are listened to consciously... bells, whistles, horns and sirens... sound signals may often be organized into quite elaborate codes permitting messages of considerable complexity to be transmitted to those who can interpret them.”[5] The last feature, *soundmark*, “is derived from *landmark* and refers to a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community.”[5]

Quoting Schafer’s own words of definitions is needed to enhance the authenticity of understanding these features. But more importantly, the quotations subtly and implicitly demonstrated Schafer’s ideological and conceptual tendency – a soundscape work is representational and symbolic, that sound in nature is “sensed” and is given meanings by the human perceptual experiences or by the specific indication of the environmental sources.

The purpose and notion that Schafer defined, to “isolate an acoustic environment as a field of study,”[5] after all might not be a full isolation in Schafer’s world. A few questions are at stake here:

1) should soundscape be solely sonic documentary or an artistic/aesthetic expression? 2) Does soundscape embody visual and symbolic meanings? 3) If the acoustic sources of a soundscape essentially form an immersive environment, how would the documents (recordings) be capturing the *immersiveness* that is supposed to be the core spirit of soundscape? To seek answers for these doubts, it urges all thinkers to locate Francisco López's writings.

3. Francisco López – Realism vs. Abstractionism

This term paper would create questionable scholarship, if the essay “Environmental Sound Matter,” written by Francisco López in 1997 (twenty years after Schafer's book) is omitted. In the essay, the *sonicist* (López's preferred title) provided background information of the originality of the sound sources and the environment of rain forest in Costa Rica in his important *soundscape* work, *La Selva*, which involves dimensional sounds from the various sound sources available in the source-site – river, crickets, birds, all sorts of animals, and even plants, etc.

Nevertheless, López clearly redefined the sonic world in *La Selva* that the sound environment is not to be labelled as *bioacoustics* – while the reference and representation to animal or species might happen in the so-called “blind listening”[6] process, these are never his main intentional purpose as an artist. Indeed, López aimed for a certain equality in the nature sound environment to perceive the soundscape as a whole. Even though *La Selva* has been reviewed by people who lived there as immensely real, López confessed that with the input of microphone (of different interfaces) and the mixing process among the enriching environment sound sources, the sense of naturalness and realism in *La Selva* is challenged and negotiated once the act of recording and sound editing are done.[6] In other words, *La Selva* is never merely a musical documentation of the rain forest of Costa Rica and is even not intended for purely realistic. Yet, it is a product of sonic composition and art. López's ideology as an artist and musician, believed in the convincing fact that any composition (including soundscape) is an expressive form of one's own voice and artistic freedom. The following quote from López's another essay vividly unfolds his viewpoint on considering soundscape work as an art, as opposed to the notion of soundscape as the musical *landscape*:

“The ‘abstractionism’ of the art *des sons fixes* is precisely a “musicalization.” It can obviously close doors in the experiential description of sounds and their sources, but it opens new doors of artistic creation. A musical composition (no matter whether based on *soundscape*s or not) must be a free action in the sense of not having to refuse any extraction of elements from reality and also in the sense of having the full right to be self-referential, not being subjected to a pragmatic goal such as a supposed, unjustified re-integration of the listener with the environment.”[7]

The concept of “abstractionism” and “musicalization” advocated by López centered on how the sonic fidelity and artistic expression are to be prioritized and soundscape work should never be approached and perceived as mere representational of the site where the sources came from, which suggested a new approach to understanding the art. The “sound matter” according to López, also refers to the listening mode of perceiving sounds as pure entities. López intended to promote the sonic fidelity that essentially also applies to perceivers' listening to the sound itself:

“My approach to nature sound environments is devoid of such analytical or explanative goals, trying to forcefully move away from a rationalization and categorization of these aural entities... it promotes a perceptual shifting from recognition and differentiation of sound sources to the appreciation of the resulting sound matter. I conceive this as an ideal form of transcendental listening that doesn't deny all what is outside the sounds but explores and affirms all what is inside them.”[6]

The “transcendental listening” here undoubtedly would not be a complete brand-new idea ever since Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrete*, corresponding with the idea that sound stands and exists for its own sake, which in fact, echoed with the long-term discourse on *absolute* vs. *program* music.

As Grey sharply defined, “any music is ‘*absolute*’ – in the usual understanding of the term – if it is presented to the listener as a sounding aesthetic object...”[8] and Hanslick’s bluntly argued that “the representation of feelings is not the content of music.”[8] Here, the philosophical conception of sound object proves to be useful and indisputable that the creation of soundscape was born of the idea that embraces *the scape in acoustic* (or in López’s descriptive word choice of *acousmatic*). The essence of soundscape lies on the reality and immersion of perceiving the sound environment – unfortunately they are hindered by the sonic delivery in recordings. Meanwhile, soundscape does not necessarily deny the potential social meanings and natural condition of the space that can be delineated by the perceivers at all. Indeed, having the sense of the imagined place or actual site can happen in the listening process, yet the soundscape work can never be fully symbolic to the site with the evidently limitations of lacking *immersiveness* in recordings.

4. Garth Paine – “Acoustic Ecology 2.0”

The overwhelming use of the term *soundscape* in the field undoubtedly has overshadowed its very first heuristic value on the aspect on how it raised our attention as human beings to closely listen to the environmental acoustic. If López’s essays offered us more insights on what *soundscape* means artistically as a work of sonic art, Garth Paine’s article awakened and advocated the more appropriate terminology of *acoustic ecology* – the term and concept deserved in-depth emphasis with its larger scope in meanings that deal with human-beings’ awareness to sounds that are around us. The heuristic deeper meanings are centered on how Paine stated that the “anthropocentric” view allowed us to view acoustic ecology more than just an artistic medium, but also the world’s well-being that is inseparably interacting. Indeed, acoustic ecology is a term that is interdisciplinary that matters within and outside the sonic world. As Paine stated that it may be our responsibility to have the “desire to protect and maintain a status quo in the sound make-up of our environment, that is, to work against any further perceived degradation of the environment.”[9]

The criticized sound of “noise” was brought up by Schafer in his book with the systematic categorization of “hi-fi” and “lo-fi” sounds. The need for the quietness has been acknowledged yet was never explored in terms of any systematic proposal on how to eventually make the balance happen, especially in this modern industrial era that is certainly “noisier” than ever. As Paine convincingly puts in the article, biophony (the simplest and crude defined analogy would be animal sounds), anthrophony (human-made sounds and urban sounds, for example) and geophony (“river sounds,” etc.) all form the ecology of sounds in our world. In other words, even the so-called “noises” exist as part of the ecological system, instead of the mere isolation.[9]

The quotation is needed here with the word “noise” as the measurement varied upon the diverse sensibilities and adaptations to noise level that are embedded to the perception of humans. According to Paine, the nature of ecosystem is never static yet is always changing; therefore, Paine argued that “deep listening” is essential in listening different sound sources and connect them as one *ecology* to better understand the sonic world and well-being. The concept he termed, *somaphony*, is defined “as a subconscious listening to the entire soundfield as a singular *gestalt*...a form of passive listening where the scale of the perceived soundfield expands beyond the immediate location to include all sound as a confluence of influences.”[9] This ultimately leads to Paine’s *Listen(n) Project*:

“*The Listen(n) Project* seeks to document the sounds of the environment in protected national parks and conservancies of south-western USA... *The Listen(n) Project* is the first large-scale citizen science project where all sound recordings are made in ambisonic format, because it provides a spatial map of events and atmospheres. The tools we are developing will be impactful for both land management of natural preserves and the analysis of urban environments in terms of wellness metrics... the virtual reality system is built using panoramic photographs of the same locations that

are regularly recorded by citizen scientists and *the Listen(n) Team* in ambisonic format. *EcoRift* is designed to act as a context for listening.”[9]

This project unfolds Paine’s long-term plan to document large data sets of sonic documentations and specific environmental sites that will potentially contribute to further innovative psychoacoustic measurement, and that its online access removes the barrier and enables its contents to be accessed by people around the world with internet. Another emphasis of the project is the pedagogical purpose on developing people’s practice of listening and aural skills that are crucial to refine human’s sensibilities to sounds. This ambitious attempt requires long-term process to demonstrate that listeners could be “expert observers” of sounds that could reflect the environmental, climate, and landscape changes that happen as time goes on. In addition to the educational purpose of sharing different perspectives and research, the project is accompanied with virtual reality system with photos that aim to enhance the immersive experience to greater extent possible, which would scientifically and systemically document sonic environments that constitute a large data collection for future and potential reference and analysis to specific places and environmental sources in order to measure the correlation and balance of the acoustic ecology. The “embodied” experience, is central to Paine’s belief on the existence of listening that it is beyond the invisible perceived sounds:

“Listening is itself a form of knowledge, an embodied knowledge... please close your eyes, and for a few minutes, go to a place full of sounds that you like. Listen carefully to the atmosphere and the close and distant sounds that come to you. Memory-based listening demonstrates the manner in which sound is embodied, retained in the body as a kind of visceral experience.”[9]

The embodiment and bodily participation here echoed with the *immersiveness* that is needed in acoustic ecology, with an indirect implication of sounds having quality of *corporeality*, despite of its *invisibility* in nature. Nevertheless, what Paine really argued here is not necessarily *what* sound is, but *what* sound could *do*, as he vividly explained, “the sound of our environment is one of our most important triggers for memory.”[9] Paine convincingly raised our attention again on the power of sound, while its temporal quality often made it to be compromised by our visual instinct.

5. Conclusion

Defining *soundscape* and *acoustic ecology* undoubtedly causes dilemma for an agreed validation and conclusion due to the abundant writings that resulted in different perspectives and viewpoints. Murray Schafer’s devotion and contribution on soundscape provided spaces for later artists such Francisco López who continued to create new works and understanding of soundscape as an art. Garth Paine’s sensibility in today’s generation with advanced technology allows him to revisit the value and meanings of the preferred term *acoustic ecology* – the model and the *Listen(n)* Project connect our communities for improving the well-being and seeking balance of sonic environment of the world. This paper acts as merely a starting point for further research and investigation on the concepts and works. However, a bold but safe argument is intended for the term paper: all artists/scholars mentioned above raised the need for our sound awareness (even body awareness from Paine’s article). I argued that the two keywords, “transcendental listening” and “deep listening” both are embedded and inherited with an etymological meaning of *beyond something*. Thus, our positions as human-beings, artists, musicians all should possess critical listening to sounds around us and embrace all types of listening modes: *listen to the sound*; *listen beyond the sound*; *listen beyond the source*; *listen beyond the art*. In the end, what “-scape” means does not matter at all, what matter is we do not escape from the sonic world.

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